

Sen. Allen popular with conservative PAC

By Ralph Z. Hallow
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Sen. George Allen, the Virginia Republican and conservative stalwart who ousted incumbent Democrat Charles Robb in November, was one of the key speakers on the last day of the 28th annual Conservative Political Action Conference.

"I've spoken to you before as governor [of Virginia] and also as a private citizen," a beaming Mr. Allen said. "I'm proud that this is my first CPAC as a U.S. senator."

Organizers said it was the most successful CPAC in memory, with a record 3,478 registered participants and about 100 speakers over three days.

They gathered from across the country for the meeting at the Crystal Gateway Marriott in Arlington, in a state that now has Republicans holding the offices of governor, lieutenant-governor and attorney general and in control of both houses of the state's legislature.

Conservatives, who not too long ago despaired that their movement was leaderless and adrift, now see successful leaders virtually everywhere.

In the annual poll of conference participants, conservatives named their favorites, and their top choice was President Bush, who leaped from an 86 percent approval rating in 1999, when he was governor of Texas, to 96 percent yesterday.

Second place went to Attorney General John Ashcroft, with 93 percent, and third in conservative affection was Oklahoma Rep. J.C. Watts, the House Republican Conference chairman. He was followed by House Majority Leader Dick Armey and House Majority Whip Tom DeLay, both of Texas.

Arizona Sen. John McCain, once a darling of the right, registered the most spectacular change in status. Many participants this year said they now regarded him as the most dangerous Republican apostate in the Senate.

Mr. McCain, who is pushing the kind of campaign finance reform that most conservatives see as a direct threat to freedom of speech

Conservatives not long ago despaired that their movement was adrift but now see successful leaders virtually everywhere.

and political advocacy, had a mere 30 percent disapproval rating in the 1999 CPAC poll. Last year that climbed to 36 percent. But by the time the latest poll was tallied yesterday, 54 percent of CPAC participants who filled out the questionnaire said they disapproved of him.

"Numbers like that are not all that attractive to a man who might try to seek support from Republicans to fulfill his ambitions," conference organizer David A. Keene said in announcing the poll results.

Mr. McCain was not invited to address this year's conference — and was not much missed, judging

by the laughter and applause greeting Mr. Keene's remarks.

"But when you compare these numbers with the image conservatives had of John McCain three, four and five years ago, one has to say he is a man who worked hard to get to where he is today," Mr. Keene said.

In fact, Mr. McCain is "almost as popular as Pat Buchanan with this group," Mr. Keene said.

Mr. Buchanan, who for many years could be counted on to bring CPAC audiences to their feet in frenzied appreciation for his eloquent statements of his brand of conservatism, fared even worse than Mr. McCain in the latest poll.

A former aide to Presidents Nixon, Reagan and Ford and three-time Republican presidential contender, Mr. Buchanan went from a 30 percent disapproval rating in 1999 to a 57 percent disapproval rating yesterday.

Mr. Buchanan, who resigned from the Republican Party to head the Reform presidential ticket last year, was not invited to address CPAC this year.